

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE

Paul Stevenson describes the life and career of George Pal, one of the great animators

Destination Moon... When Worlds Collide... War of the Worlds... The Time Machine... Names familiar to any fan of the SF/fantasy genre and all produced by George Pal. A pioneer in the field, Pal tried selling ideas that were, at the time, regarded as pure fantasy — such as a trip to the Moon or Mars or life on other worlds. Even with the success of those early films, he never was to find it easy to launch new projects — particularly in later years.

Born on February 1st, 1908, in Cegled, Hungary, George Pal's family already had strong theatrical connections. (His mother and father were well-known stage actors.) However, Pal did not follow in his parents' footsteps, electing instead to train as an architect. After graduating, he became a cartoonist, designing title cards for silent films.

INDEPENDENT

In 1930, shortly after getting married, Pal and his wife moved to Berlin and he secured a job at the UFA studios, soon becoming head of the cartoon department. He left in 1932 and began working independently, having no trouble getting assignments — most of them being animated commercials for movie theatres. One of them — a cigarette commercial — was based on an idea that would later develop into his famous Puppertoons.

The following year saw the rise of Nazism, and Pal's hatred of directorships forced him to move to Prague, where work was scarce. He then landed in Paris, working for Philips Radio, who helped him establish a studio in Holland, where he finally settled and began producing more Puppertoontype adverts.

INVADED

During this time, Columbia University (in Los Angeles) invited Pal over to

deliver a lecture that went down so well he was invited back, towards the end of 1939. It was during this visit that Poland was invaded and Pal and his wife decided to stay in America. Aware of his arrival, Paramount Pictures contacted Pal and signed him up to produce a new series of Puppertoons for them — but strictly for entertainment this time, not advertising.

Between 1940 and '47, Pal produced 41 Puppertoons and received an Academy Award in 1943 for pioneering new techniques in animated pictures. (For the first couple of years, one of Pal's employees was a young Ray Harryhausen.) After the close of the Puppertoont studios, Pal was determined to produce a live-action feature. He had three projects in mind that he tried to sell; *Tom Thumb*, *Rupert* and *Operation Moon*. He sold *Rupert*, which was released in 1949 as *The Great Rupert*. A musical comedy, it featured an animated squirrel that many people took for real. While no box-office hit, it was well received by the critics and Paramount gave him the go-ahead to make his next feature; *Operation Moon*.

JUVENILE

Released in 1950 as *Destination Moon*, with a script by Robert A. Heinlein and Rip Van Ronkel (from Heinlein's juvenile novel *Rocketship Galileo*) and directed by Irving Pichel (who also directed *Rupert*), it became one of the year's most popular films and earned an Oscar for best special effects. Heinlein wrote an interesting account of the almost fanatical attention to detail that permeated the film in order to enhance its believability. (Remember, this was seven years before Sputnik and nineteen years before the real Moon landing.) Today, the film looks dated and is rather dull since it has now been overtaken by reality. Its success, however, enabled

Pal to make another SF film *When Worlds Collide* (1951 directed by Rudolph Mate and with a screenplay by Sydney Boehm).

Based on the book by Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer, it concerns the attempts of a group of people who would build a Space Ark in order to escape from a doomed Earth due to be hit by a runaway star — Bellus. The survivors land on Zyra, a captive planet accompanying Bellus.

This modern-day Noah's Ark story had originally been bought for Cecil B. De Mille back in 1934. It lay around collecting dust, until Pal decided to take a crack at it. Like *Destination Moon*, the film for the most part concerns the building of the Ark itself. The actual journey to Zyra only takes up the last part of the film.

ANOTHER AWARD

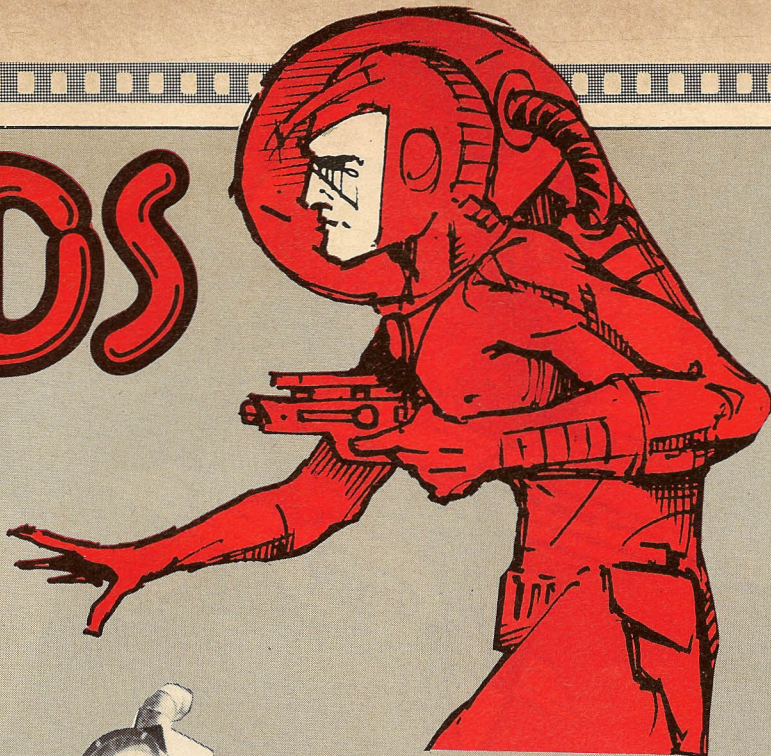
The film did well and won another award for special effects. Pal persuaded Paramount to pick up the rights for the sequel *After Worlds Collide*, but the project eventually fell by the wayside as did another proposal to make a film version of Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*. (This was eventually to be made by Disney in 1954.)

Like *When Worlds Collide*, Pal's next film had also been bought for De Mille back in 1925. In the period before Pal finally made it, other producers and directors would buy the rights, but do nothing with them. They included; Russian director Sergei Eisenstein, Alexander Korda (who abandoned the idea in order to make *The Shape Of Things To Come* — 1939), Robert Fellows and Alfred Hitchcock.

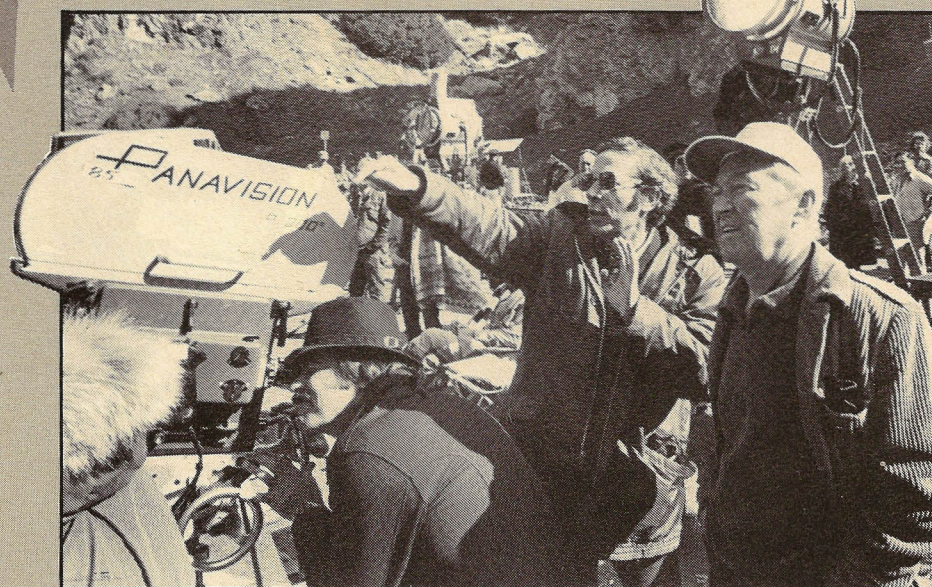
EXPENSIVE

The film is, of course, *War Of The Worlds* (1953) and was Pal's most expensive feature yet. Despite a two

WORLDS COLIDE



Pal as producer making *Doc Savage*. . . *Man of Bronze*



million dollar budget, it was not considered enough to do a period piece — setting the film in 1890's England. Pal decided, for greater audience involvement, to set the film in present-day (1950's) California and change the Martian war machines from Tripods (which would have been expensive and time-consuming to animate) to sleek, copper-coloured, Manta-ray shapes with a 'cobra-head' heat ray projector.

Three models were built, each 42 inches wide and supported by fifteen wires (which were unfortunately visible at certain periods in the film) attached to an overhead moving platform. These allowed models to glide over the miniature landscape. Originally, they toyed with the idea of keeping in the three legs by having the war machines supported by ray-like magnetic beams. (In the film, you can just see them — three sparkling lines that required over a million volts — when the Martians rise out of the gully, before they begin attacking.

Because of the danger of electrocution and fire hazards, the idea was only used that one time.)

THE MARTIAN

Also only used briefly was the Martian itself, played by make-up man Charles Gemora, who also designed the creature (a design that is supposed to have been as inspiration for Spielberg's final look for *E.T.*).

Although not an actors' film, and despite the inevitable contrived romance (an idea that Pal fought against), it still did very well and is probably the best known of Pal's work. This success was due to the — at the time — spectacular special effects, which copped another Oscar that year.

Taking a break from the world of SF films, Pal then made *Houdini* (1953), a filmic biography of the world-famous escapologist. This was a very personal subject for Pal, who had always been a fan of stage magicians.

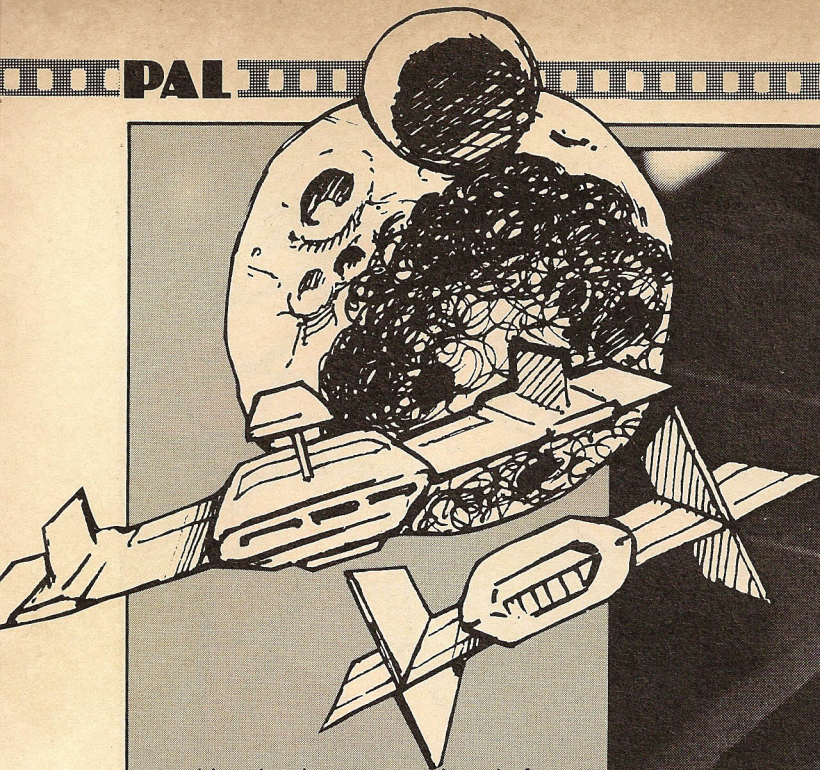
Next came *The Naked Jungle* (1954), a South American adventure film featuring Charlton Heston battling a horde of soldier ants that threaten to destroy his plantation.

A CLASSIC CASE

Pal returned to SF for his next film, his last one for Paramount before moving to MGM. *Conquest Of Space* (1955) is a classic case of a film ruined through too much interference from film executives. What should have been a fascinating account of the first attempted landing on Mars was turned into an embarrassing spacebound soap-opera, riddled with scientific mistakes. Instead of the inevitable love interest, we have a father/son conflict with the father turning into a religious fanatic. When the mission starts, he begins staring glassily out of a porthole, clutching his Bible. During the landing on Mars, he attempts to stop it by reasoning that 'There are some things that man was meant not to do'.

These heavy-handed religious overtones had also been included in Pal's two previous films. *When Worlds Collide* opens with parchment scrolls revealing a Biblical prophecy of doom. The film ends in a similar way with the survivors landing on Zyra — accompanied by the sound of a choir of angels — and other scroll stating that 'The first day on the new world had begun'.

They crop up again in *War Of The Worlds*, something that would have annoyed the atheistic Wells. Pastor Collins who, by an absurd process of reasoning, deduces that as the Martians are technologically more advanced than we, they must be nearer the creator. Bible in hand and quoting the twenty-third psalm, he walks into the path of the oncoming war machines and is promptly zapped for his trouble. At the end, the war machines begin



crashing in the streets, just before they destroy the church that the central characters have taken shelter in. Once reassured that the invaders are dead, killed by 'The littlest things that God in his infinite wisdom put on the Earth', we begin hearing churchbells and songs.

OTHER PROJECTS

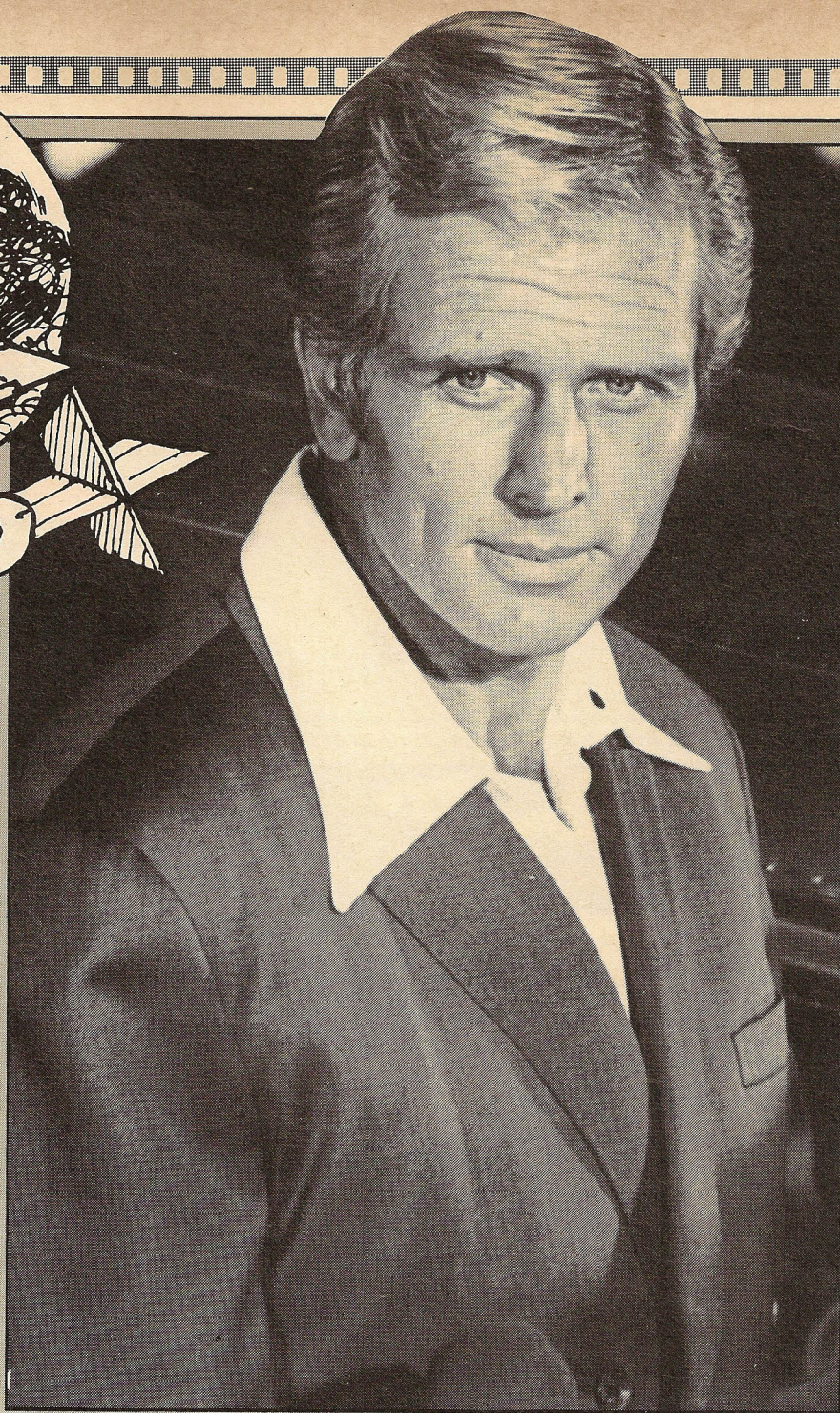
Fortunately, *Conquest Of Space* was the last film to receive this kind of treatment and a four-year gap followed before Pal began working for MGM. During this time, Pal tried launching other projects; *The Time Machine*, *Tom Thumb*, *Atlantis* and *The Wonderful World Of The Brothers Grimm*.

It was *Tom Thumb* (1958) that got off the ground first. Pal brought the production team over to MGM's studios in England, where most of it was made. The film was a huge success and collected another Oscar for — you've guessed it — special effects. MGM contracted Pal for further productions.

He returned to SF for *The Time Machine* (1960) and despite the simplification of Wells' story, the film remains an effective blend of SF, fantasy and horror and was the most financially successful of his films, garnering another Oscar for its effects. (The time travel sequences were very ingeniously done. Among them, the window dummy sequence, showing the passage of time by the constantly changing fashions on the mannequin. A simple, but very effective idea.)

Less successful was his next film *Atlantis, The Lost Continent* (1961). While still working on the screenplay, MGM executives pressured Pal into prematurely starting work on the film. Due to this, and insufficient money, the film suffered badly.

The Wonderful World of The



Ron Ely. A six foot five inch giant, he'd been a screen Tarzan before working with Pal

Brothers Grimm (1962) was written as an episodic adventure, mixing the writers' life stories with their fairy stories. Pal directed the fairy stories while Levin handled the biographical sequences. While containing some impressive effects, the film did not do all that well.

The origin of Pal's next film occurred while making *Brothers Grimm*. He had asked the writer, Charles Beaumont, if he had any pet projects that he would like to do. Beaumont immediately handed him a treatment that he had already done. That became the starting point for *The Seven Faces Of Dr Lao* (1964). The film concerns a strange circus run by an old Chinaman who turns up in a small Arizona town.

The Chinaman (well played by Tony Randall) adopts a number of different disguises in order to teach a lesson to different members of the town. While a bit preachy at times, the film is good fun and did fairly well at the box-office. (A proposed sequel, taking Dr Lao behind the Iron Curtain, was never made.)

EXPERIMENT

Pal's next venture was the SF mystery *The Power* (1967). The film concerns a scientist working in a research lab who, through a telekinetic experiment, discovers that one of his co-workers has tremendous mental powers. He attempts to identify who



Pal poses with star Ron Ely and director Michael Anderson before making *Doc Savage*

as, his colleagues are killed one by one, but he survives. He realises that he too is a mutant and the film climaxes with a mental battle between the two, the killer eventually having his heart stopped.

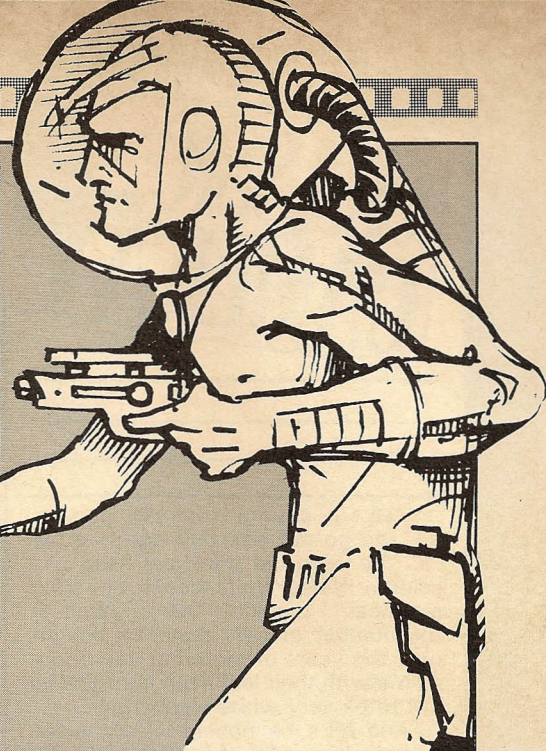
During this film, there had been considerable friction between Pal and the MGM executives. As a result, it was released with no publicity and everyone at MGM hoped it would flop — which it did.

IGNORED

Pal left MGM and freelanced, hoping to sell to other studios but executives ignored him and his previous achievements. (Among some of his

projects were *Logan's Run* and *When The Sleeper Awakes*. Both of which made it to script form.) It wasn't until 1973 that Pal began to work on what would be his final film, *Doc Savage: Man Of Bronze* (1974). Adapted from the first of the 181 Doc Savage novels by Kenneth Robeson, the films was treated in a very lighthearted, joky manner, reminiscent of the *Batman* TV series. Some critics felt that director Anderson (*Logan's Run* and TV's *Martian Chronicles*) was the wrong choice for a film of this nature. The embarrassing results proved the point. The film failed miserably.

From then, until the day he died, Pal kept on pushing and never gave up trying to sell products such as a TV



mini-series adaptation of the H.G. Wells novel *In The Days Of The Comet*.

DAMAGED

A sequel to *The Time Machine* that Pal had been trying to get off the ground ever since making the original film was mooted. The Time Traveller takes a pregnant Weena back to his own time so that the child can be born there, but the Time Machine arrives back in London during the blitz of 1943 and is badly damaged. The pair are fatally wounded and with the last of their strength, Weena manages to give birth. All this is watched by someone in a modern Time Machine. This turns out to be the baby, who as an adult, has just witnessed his own birth and the death of his parents. The film concerns him heading into the future, trying to find his parents and warn them of their death.

The Voyage Of The Berg was to involve an oil-rich country that has very little fresh water but can afford to have water brought to them in the shape of an iceberg, floated down from the Arctic circle.

Other projects in the wind were: *Pander's People*, from the novel by Lord Dunsany, all about the creation of an intelligent robot. Also planned was an updated remake of his 1951 film *When Worlds Collide*. None of these projects ever came to pass and on May 2nd, 1980, George Pal died of a heart attack at his Beverly Hills home in Los Angeles. He was seventy-two years old.

It's a tribute to his enthusiasm and love for the genre that he kept on hustling ideas, never giving up, no matter how many doors he had slammed in his face by people cashing in on the SF boom in films. A boom that he should have been a part of, since he was producing them long before they ever became 'fashionable', and while his early films may have varied in quality, he was, at that time, the only friend the SF community had. ■